

# IT MUST BE THE END OF TIME: APOCALYPTIC *AḤĀDĪTH* AS A RECORD OF THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY'S REACTIONS TO THE TURBULENT FIRST CENTURIES

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Many people have found the Sunni idea that one owes obedience to established authorities, *even if they are tyrannical and corrupt*, to be a troubling religious-political tenet.<sup>1</sup> This precept appears to have gained widespread support relatively early in Islamic history and eventually became an integral part of numerous credal statements. For instance, al-Ṭaḥāwī, who died in 933 CE, claimed in his credal statement, “We do not approve of going out in rebellion against any of our imams or administrators, even if they act wrongfully toward us.”<sup>2</sup> The same idea is expressed in various *aḥādīth* found in the canonical Sunni collections, such as the following *ḥadīth* from al-Bukhārī’s *Saḥīḥ*:

(Musaddid—‘Abd al-Wārith—al-Ju’dī—Abū Rajā’—Ibn ‘Abbās—) The Prophet (PBUH) said, “Whoever dislikes something that his leader has done, let him

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<sup>1</sup> Muslims as well as Westerners have found this tenet troubling—as early as al-Jāḥiẓ, we see supporters of the tenet derisively referred to as “Nābīta” which Charles Pellat defines as “bad lot, rogues.” See the article by Pellat in EI2, sv “Nābīta.”

<sup>2</sup> See the credal statements translated in Montgomery Watt’s *Islamic Creeds* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994). In the “Shorter Hanbalite Creed,” for example, one finds the statement “We do not take up the sword against commanders even when they are unjust” (Watt, p. 32). In the “Longer Hanbalite Creed,” (both Hanbalite credal statements are found in Ibn Abī Ya‘la’s *Tabaqāt al-Hanābila*) we find this idea elaborated upon: “The Jihad is valid along with the imams, whether they act uprightly or sinfully; it is not invalidated either by the evil of the evil doer or the justice of the just. Friday worship, the (celebration of the) two feasts and the pilgrimage (are to be observed) with the rulers, even if these are not upright, just and pious. (Various taxes) . . . are to be paid to the commanders, whether they have dealt justly or evilly in respect of them. . . . Do not rebel against authority, but listen and obey, and do not break your oath of allegiance” (Watt, p. 35). In al-ʿAsh‘arī’s (d. 935) creed (found in both his *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn* and his *al-Ibāna ‘an uṣūl al-dīyāna*) we find the precept, “We think it is proper to pray for the welfare of the imams of the Muslims, not to rebel against them with the sword, and not to fight in civil strife; and to call him erring who approves of rebellion against them (even) when they clearly cease to act uprightly” (Watt, p. 45) Najm al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī (d. 1142) proclaimed, in describing the attributes of the *imām*, that “he is not to be removed from the imamate because of transgressing (the divine law) or acting unjustly” (Watt, p. 84).

be forbearing, for whoever departs even a hand's span from authority will die as a pagan. (*man kariha min amīrihi shay'an, fa-l-yaṣbur, fa-innahu man kharaja min al-sultāni shibran māta mūtatan jāhiliyyah.*)<sup>3</sup>

Why did this quietist tenet embracing any authority, no matter how corrupt, gain such widespread acceptance that it was not only expressed in *ahādīth*, but also in Sunni credal statements? It seems hardly sufficient to explain it by saying that Sunnism represented the views of caliphal loyalists. Nor is it simply that Muslims believed that it was "religiously wrong" to shed the blood of fellow Muslims. It seems rather that the experience of the first centuries, during which religio-political factions competing for legitimacy and loyalty repeatedly ripped apart the unity of the early community, left a strong imprint on the memories of many Muslims; the lesson that was driven home was that the unity of the community is a frail and precious thing: if it is lost, not only bloodshed, but also despair and confusion take its place. If we read the Islamic apocalyptic literature in light of the historical record of the wars and dissension that rent the early Islamic community asunder, we find evidence that the roots of the widespread acceptance—and it was certainly never accepted by all—of this tenet embracing any authority lay in the bewilderment and despair caused by the rebellions, conflicts, and discord that beset the early Muslim community.<sup>4</sup>

Before discussing these Islamic apocalyptic traditions, it is important to point out that Islamic apocalyptic literature differs in form from its Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian counterparts. These latter usually include detailed chronologies of the eschaton presented as revelations from God through a heavenly mediator, which are pseudonymously attributed to a "long dead holy man of great renown."<sup>5</sup> Muslim apocalyptic prophecies, by contrast, generally take the form of short prophetic pronouncements attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad or his Companions. The Islamic literary tradition recognizes them as "apocalyptic" insofar as they are prophetic in form and they concern the "signs" of the last hour and the tribulations that are to precede

<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ* (n.p.: Dār al-Fikr, 1981) Vol. 4, section 8, p. 87 (*kitāb al-fitan*).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the fact that at the very least rulers and those speaking on their behalf made such claims at an early date has been recognized by Montgomery Watt, Ann Lambton and others. See Lambton in *State and Government in Medieval Islam: an Introduction to the study of Islamic Political theory* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) pp. 46-47. John Burton attributes the "passivity and resignation . . . drummed into the public mind in ḥadīth after ḥadīth" to the effects of the "fearless raids and ceaseless depredations of the Kharijites." John Burton, *An Introduction to the Ḥadīth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994) pp. 46-48. The idea that propagating political passivity through *ahādīth* dates back to the first centuries was also recognized by Goldziher, in the second volume of his *Muslim Studies*, translated by C.R. Barbar and S.M. Stern (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967), pp. 76-77, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994) p. 5.

the last hour. These apocalyptic *ahādīth* (traditions of the Prophet and early Companions) were thus grouped together in the canonical Sunni *hadīth* collections in sections entitled “*kitāb al-ḥitan*”<sup>6</sup> (the Chapter on Tribulations), “*kitāb al-ḥitan wa ash-rāʾ al-sāʿah*”<sup>7</sup> (the Chapter on Tribulations and the Portents of the Last Hour), “*kitāb al-ḥitan wa-l-malāḥim*”<sup>8</sup> (the Chapter on Tribulations and Bloody Battles) or in similarly titled monographs.<sup>9</sup> Most of these *ahādīth*, because of their brevity, and because they lack specific references to historical events, cannot be ascribed a firm dating. Nonetheless, we can be certain of the death dates of the authors who collected them and committed them to writing, such as al-Bukhārī (d. 870 CE), Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875 CE), the early author of a monograph containing apocalyptic prophecies, Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (d. 843 CE, during the *miḥna*) and Ibn Lahīʿah, (d. 790 CE), some of whose traditions, preserved on papyrus, have been examined by Raif Khoury.<sup>10</sup> We can also date some of them by the events that they describe, and some of those that we can thus date clearly originate from the first century.<sup>11</sup>

Many Islamic apocalyptic *ahādīth* appear to have been aimed at motivating people to take part in specific religio-political causes.<sup>12</sup> In these “propagandistic apocalyptic *ahādīth*,” as Wilferd Madelung has called them, people are enjoined to support a cause which is presented as “the cause of righteousness” and which is described well enough so that people would recognize it even though it was described in apocalyptic terms. The most famous examples of this are the apocalyptic traditions about the ‘Abbasid cause in which the ‘Abbasid armies are presented as supporters of righteousness

<sup>6</sup> The *Kitāb al-ḥitan* of al-Bukhārī’s *Saḥīḥ*. I have chosen here to translate “*ḥitan*” as “tribulations” rather than “trials” (even though the word “trials” in English gives more closely the corresponding sense of both hardship and temptation in one word) since “tribulations,” like the Arabic “*ḥitan*,” resonates with more apocalyptic connotations. Elsewhere the sense of “civil strife,” “factional strife” or “sectarian strife” will perhaps more accurately convey the meaning in the texts; these terms will be used interchangeably as translations of “*ḥitan*” in the body of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> The *Kitāb al-ḥitan wa ash-rāʾ al-sāʿah* of Muslim’s *Saḥīḥ*.

<sup>8</sup> The *Kitāb al-ḥitan wa-l-malāḥim* of Abū Dawūd’s *Sunan*.

<sup>9</sup> Among the more well-known are Ibn Kathīr’s *Kitāb al-nihāyah*, Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād’s *Kitāb al-ḥitan*, and al-Qurtubī’s *Tadhkirah*.

<sup>10</sup> Raif Georges Khoury, *ʿAbd Allāh b. Lahīʿah (97-174/715-790): Juge et Grand Maître de l’École Égyptienne* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> *Aḥādīth* about the *maḥdī* that obviously refer to the career of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, for instance, clearly date to the first century. See Wilferd Madelung’s “Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Maḥdī” in *JNES* 40, (1981) pp. 291-306. For other examples as well, see the articles by Madelung cited in note 12.

<sup>12</sup> These have been rather extensively studied by Wilferd Madelung in “‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Maḥdī,” “The Sufyānī between Tradition and History” *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986) pp. 4-48; and “Apocalyptic Prophecies in Hims in the Umayyad Age” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986) pp. 141-86.

coming from the east with black banners. External markers of this cause were thus described well enough to enable people who heard the tradition to recognize that the 'Abbasid armies coming from Khurasan with black banners fit the description of those who would usher in a reign of righteousness. In nearly all variations of the *aḥādīth* that encourage good Muslims to support that cause, we find the admonition, "Whoever among you lives in that time (*man adraka dhālika minkum*), let him go to them, even if he must crawl upon ice."<sup>13</sup> It is obvious to us now that this was propaganda enlisting support for the 'Abbasid cause, and it is thus roughly datable.

It is clear, however, that it was often *not* obvious to many Muslims which cause was the cause of righteousness. This is reflected in the apocalyptic *ḥadīth* literature in several ways. Firstly, and doubtless unique to the Islamic tradition, there are many *aḥādīth* that justify refraining from joining causes and abstaining from participation in religio-political strife.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Nu'aym b. Ḥammād devoted a short chapter of his book of apocalyptic *aḥādīth*, *Kitāb al-ḥitan*, to *aḥādīth* that support keeping aloof from factional strife.<sup>15</sup> This aversion to participation in factional strife, as supported by *aḥādīth* that are categorized by Muslim authors as pertaining to the Last Hour, eventually crystallized into the Sunni tenet that obeying established authority, even if it be corrupt, is better than participating in rebellions that bring a state of chaos upon the community. Civil strife and dissension in the early Muslim community clearly engendered a keen sense of bewilderment, despair, and anomic among many Muslims.

The histories chronicle the succession of wars and rebellions that beleaguered the early Muslim community. After the assassination of the caliph 'Uthmān in 656 CE, the Muslim community experienced rebellions, uprisings, religious schismatic movements, and competing claims to legitimate leadership up to and beyond the 'Abbasid revolution. Within the first sixty years of the death of the Prophet, for instance, the community witnessed

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Kathīr, (d. 773 AH) *Kitāb al-Nihāyah* ed. Tāhā Muḥammad al-Zaynī (Cairo: Dār al-Naṣr, 1969) vol. 1, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, one assumes that it was in the interest of rulers and states to circulate *aḥādīth* that discouraged people from rebelling and from participating in any form of factionalism that might threaten the status quo. However, it seems that the principle of abstention from the civil discord of *ḥitan* may just as easily have resulted from the bitterly disappointing and confusing experiences of Muslims in the first two centuries of Islamic history. Attempts to overthrow the ruling order in favor of one more "Islamic" or one more interested in justice, etc., almost universally failed and so would seem not to have attained God's favor, which would presumably have been shown by military or political success. The 'Abbasid cause clearly garnered massive popular support, and promptly dashed many people's expectations after gaining victory.

<sup>15</sup> Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-ḥitan*, Ed. by Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: al-Maktaba al-ūjāriyya, 1991) "*Bāb man kāna yara al-īṭizāl min al-ḥitan*" pp. 107-110.

the Battle of the Camel, the Battle of Şifīn, the mutiny of the Kharijites, the Battle of Nahrawān, the assassination of ‘Alī, the mutiny of al-Ḥasan’s supporters, the rebellion and martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn, the two sieges of Mecca during the caliphate of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, the Penitents’ march to their suicidal battle, the rise of the Kaysaniyya movement, and the fracturing of the Kharijite community, to mention only a few such events. That such events took place is clearly evidence of mutually conflicting views of the direction God’s community should be taking. These conflicts were not simply topics of discussion—they were issues that radically divided the community, and were fought out on battlefields. The best documentation that we have of the general reaction to these civil wars—the sense of despair and bewilderment that they brought about—is contained in the apocalyptic *ḥadīth* literature.

It is in this literature, for instance, that we find statements expressing the desire to be dead,<sup>16</sup> and envy of those who have already died, such as the following:

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥārith al-Baḥrānī—Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Baylamānī—his father—Ibn ‘Umar reported that the Messenger of God said, “The Last Hour will not come about until a man passes by a grave and says, ‘Would that I were in the place of its occupant!’ due to the sectarian strife (*fitan*) that people will fall into.”<sup>17</sup>

Abū Mu‘āwiya al-A‘mash—Ibrāhīm—‘Abd Allāh said “There will come a time when men will come to graves and roll on them, as animals roll in the dust, wishing that they could be in the graves in place of their occupants—not out of the desire to meet God, but because of the *fitan* they witness.”<sup>18</sup>

Rashdīn—Ibn Lahī‘ah—Ḥaṣṣ b. al-Walīd—Hilāl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Qurashī—‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr—he heard him say, “There will come a time when men of nobility, wealth and progeny will wish for death because of the afflictions that they experience at the hands of their governors.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The prediction that people would wish to die during tribulations caused by God before the end times is not limited to Islamic apocalyptic literature. Certainly the most famous example from the Christian tradition occurs in the Revelation to John chapter nine, where it is “revealed” that locusts will be sent to torture certain humans who do not have the mark of God’s seal upon their foreheads for five months: “During the five months those men will seek death, but will not find it; they will want to die, but death will flee from them.” (NIV, Revelation to John 9:6) However, it is sometimes marked in the Islamic literature as a *response to sectarian or civil strife* or to the unjust behavior of officials, as shown here. Even if tropes that frequently recur in apocalyptic literature—such as the longing for death—cannot be trusted to necessarily indicate a widespread phenomenon, their *specific* manifestation in a given body of literature still provides us with some information about the concerns of given communities.

<sup>17</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Fitān*, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Thaqaḥfiyy - Yahyā b. Sa‘īd—al-Zabarqān Abū Hurayra said, “There will come upon the people a time when death will be more desirable to them than bathing in cool water on a scathingly hot day, but they will not die. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

In the histories we find evidence of movements that embraced martyrdom, such as that of the Penitents, who marched to their collective death in penance for not having defended al-Husayn, and in Khārījī poetry we find poems extolling the merit of “buying” life in paradise by sacrificing one’s earthly life for the cause of righteousness. The desire to embrace death portrayed in the *aḥādīth* cited here, however, is not presented as a form of piety, righteousness or penitence but seems rather to be an expression of deep despair and a sense of life’s futility—a despair apparently engendered by the confusing succession of civil wars that afflicted the early Muslim community.

In fact, the issue of whether or not it is permissible to wish for death arises. Ibn Kathīr, whose collection of apocalyptic and eschatological *aḥādīth* incorporates traditions compiled in earlier collections, discusses this issue. First, he states plainly that “asking for death (*su‘āl al-mawt*) is allowed when *fitan* arise, even though it is prohibited at all other times. He cites a *ḥadīth* that in general forbids wishing and praying for death, because longevity is a boon to the believer. Directly after that, however, he again states that asking for death is allowed during *fitan*, and as proof, he cites a part of a *ḥadīth* from Ibn Hanbal’s *Musnad* that is in the form of a prayer: “God, I ask that You let me do good works, and that You forgive me my sins and have mercy upon me, and if You should will that people fall into a *fitna*, [I ask] that You let me die before I fall prey to the *fitna*. . . .”<sup>21</sup> Thus we not only find in the apocalyptic material evidence that some people either felt a desire to die, or thought that such a feeling would be a natural response to chaos, civil wars and factionalism, we also find a discussion of whether or not such a desire should be permissible.

Another prominent theme in the apocalyptic *aḥādīth* is precisely the chaos and confusion that the community “will” experience at the end times, due to the proliferation of *fitan*. Successive rebellions or civil wars are likened to heavy rain, to stress their abundance, and to the faces of cattle, to underscore how indistinguishable they will eventually seem. The deaths that occur in their course, too, will seem confusing and senseless to both the slayers and the slain. Life during such a succession of *fitan* is also likened to a journey in a dark night, during which people stray from the path:

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Kitāb al-Nihāyah*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (Cairo: al-Maktab al-thaqāfi li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī‘, n.d.) vol. 1, p. 38, *Bāb Ifṭirāq al-Umam*.

Ibn Wahb—Ibn Lahī'a—Ibn Hubayra al-Saba'iyy who heard Abū Tamīm al-Jayshānī say that, "Civil wars (*fitan*) will come upon you like continuous rain" (*atatkum al-fitan diyaman ka-diyam al-matar*).<sup>22</sup>

Hushaym—Ibn Abī Khalid—Qays—Ibn Abī Ḥāzim said that the Messenger of God (PBUH) said, "Civil wars shall be sent upon the earth like drops of rain are sent."<sup>23</sup>

Baqiyya b. al-Walīd and Ibn al-Mughīra Ṣafwān b. 'Amr—al-Safar (?) b. Nusayr al-Azdī—Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān (May God be pleased with him) who said, "The Prophet (PBUH) said, 'There will be *fitan* like traveling during dark nights, one [dark night] following another. They will come to you resembling one another so that they are confusing, like the faces of cattle that you cannot tell apart.'"<sup>24</sup>

Ibn Abī 'Umar al-Makkī—Marwān—Yazīd (Ibn Kaysān)—Abū Ḥāzim—Abū Hurayra. The Prophet (PBUH) said, "By the One in whose hand is my soul, there will come a time when a killer will not know for what reason he has killed, nor will the slain man know why he was slain."<sup>25</sup>

In another version of this last *ḥadīth*, as soon as the Prophet has said this, he is asked, "How will that be?" He [the Prophet] answers, "Indiscriminate slaughter (*al-harj*). The killer and the one killed will [both] be sent to hell."<sup>26</sup>

The idea that both killer and killed, slayer and slain were to meet the same fate—namely hellfire—can only be understood as a strong condemnation of participation in civil strife. Yet this idea clearly struck some people as being difficult to accept wholesale. The problem of righteous or innocent Muslims being killed or condemned together with those who were perceived to be less righteous was also addressed in these *ahādīth* and stands as another strong indication of the perceived injustices and confusion of the situation. In some cases, both those who kill and those who are killed are judged to be equally culpable. In Muslim's *Saḥīḥ*, for instance, we find the following *ḥadīth*:

Abu Kāmil, Fuḍayl b. Ḥusayn al-Jahdārī Ḥammād b. Zayd—Ayyūb and Yūnus—al-Ḥasan—al-Aḥnaf b. Qays said, "I went out after a certain man (*kharajtu wa-ana urīdu hadha-l-rajula*). Abu Bakra met me and asked, 'Where are you going?' I answered, 'I am going toward victory for the Prophet's cousin,' (meaning 'Alī). He said, 'O, Aḥnaf! Go back. I heard the Messenger of God say, 'If two Muslims should confront one another with their two swords, then both the killer and man slain are destined for hellfire.' He (Abu Bakra) said—or it was said—'O Messenger of God, I understand in

<sup>22</sup> Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *Fitan* p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Muslim, *Saḥīḥ Muslim bi sharḥ al-Nawawī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994) vol. 9, p. 262.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

the case of the killer. But what is the sin of he who is killed?' He answered, 'He had intended to kill his opponent' (*innahu qad arāda qatla sāhibihi*).<sup>27</sup>

Many variations of *aḥādīth* expressing this notion exist, but the point remains the same: if you are slain because of your armed participation in *fitan* or sectarian strife, then you have earned your time in hell. In some *aḥādīth*, the crime of exacerbating civil strife is extended to include the harm that comes through participating in *fitan* through speech:

Baqiyya b. al-Walīd and 'Isa b. Yūnus—al-Aḥwaṣ b. Ḥakīm—Abū 'Awn al-Anṣārī—Sa'īd b. al-Musayyab said, "The Messenger of God (PBUH) said, 'Whoever aids in the killing of a Muslim with [even] a part of a word shall come to the Day of Resurrection with the words 'Despairing of God's Mercy' written on his forehead.'"<sup>28</sup>

Cases in which participation was considerably less voluntary are also addressed. There are many traditions about a certain "Swallowing-up of the Army," (*khasf al-jaysh*) a theme which is treated in apocalyptic *aḥādīth* that date from the first century.<sup>29</sup> In some, concern is expressed that innocent people—travelers, or soldiers who were forced to fight in an army against their will—would be swallowed up unjustly along with the willing participants and planners. The Prophet in these *aḥādīth* allows that although all these men will be swallowed up together, they eventually will be "resurrected according to their intentions."<sup>30</sup>

Other *aḥādīth* explain that a whole community can be afflicted indiscriminately by God's punishment, but provide assurances that people will be resurrected according to their deeds:

'Abd Allāh b. 'Uthmān—'Abd Allāh Yūnus—al-Zuhrī—Ḥamza b. 'Abd Allāh said that he heard 'Umar, may God be pleased with him, say that the Messenger of God (PBUH) said "When God sends down a punishment upon a community, the punishment will befall whoever is among them. Then they shall be resurrected according to their deeds."<sup>31</sup>

In these traditions, and all of their variants, the promise of a final just resurrection according to one's intentions clearly reflect how sorely felt was the need for reassurance that forced or unintended participation in sectarian strife would not lead to eternal damnation.

In other cases, it appears that blame for the destruction that will befall

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 239-240.

<sup>28</sup> Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *Fitān*, p. 106. This idea is also expressed in credal statements.

<sup>29</sup> On this, see also Madelung's "'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdi," p. 294.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-sharḥ al-Nawawī*, vol. 9, pp. 231-233. See also, Madelung, "'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdi," pp. 294-295, and Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *Fitān*, p. 202.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Cairo, Dār al-Fikr, 1981) vol. 4, pt. 8 p. 98.



the community is attributed to the general increase of evil in the community. In one *ḥadīth*, it is asked, "Shall we be destroyed *while there are righteous people among us*?" The Prophet answers, "Yes, if evil becomes plentiful" (*idha kathura al-khabath*).<sup>32</sup>

These *aḥādīth*, and there are many more like them, evince a clear concern for what will happen to the innocent and the righteous when *fitan* become rife. While in general the response given in the *aḥādīth* is reassuring—they will obtain a just resurrection in the end—a distinct sense of disquiet pervades them. Not only do we find *aḥādīth* predicting (and thereby expressing) this yearning for death, this inability to distinguish one war from another due to the fact that they come in such rapid succession and make so little sense, this bewilderment about who was just and who unjust, and this enduring concern for the innocent despite all of the confusion, we also find *aḥādīth* that predict that each year (variants: each twenty-year period, or each generation) will be worse and will find life harsher than the preceding one.<sup>33</sup> In addition, a common theme in apocalyptic *aḥādīth* is that religious knowledge will diminish before the end of time. These *aḥādīth* must be taken as an indication that some people *perceived* a general decline in guidance, security and quality of life.<sup>34</sup>

In the search for historical information in apocalyptic *aḥādīth*, to which Suliman Bashear, Michael Cook, Wilferd Madelung and others<sup>35</sup> have made important contributions, it is tempting to follow the lead of Paul Alexander<sup>36</sup> and to concentrate on teasing out information that helps to illuminate historical events. We should not neglect, however, to examine this body of literature as a record of the despair, the fears, the despondency and the confusion that beset the early Islamic community. Hints in Islamic apocalyptic *aḥādīth* might well provide us with some new insight into the exact pro-

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Kitāb al-Nihāyah*, vol. 1, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-ḥitan*, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> This idea is of course linked to the early idea that the era of the Prophet and the Companions was a golden era. However, it is worth noting that one similar concern expressed in many *aḥādīth*, namely, that the community would revert to paganism, does not seem to agree with any actual historical fact unless it can be seen as reflecting the historical circumstances of the wars of apostasy. This theme deserves further attention.

<sup>35</sup> See Suliman Bashear, "Apocalyptic and Other Materials in Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars: A Review of the Arabic Sources" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* third series, vol. 1, pt. 2, (July 1991) pp. 173-207; idem, "Muslim Apocalypses and the Hour: A Case Study in Traditional Reinterpretation" *Israel Oriental Studies XII* ed. Joel Kramer, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1993 (where Bashear concentrates more on the role of *ḥadīth* in Islamic exegesis than on the value of apocalyptic *ḥadīth* as a source for historical information); Michael Cook, "Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions" *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies no. 1*, 1992 pp. 23-49; (where Cook takes advantage of the datability of apocalyptic material to make an argument about dating isnāds); Wilferd Madelung, see footnotes 11 and 12 above; Lawrence Conrad has an article on apocalyptic *aḥādīth* forthcoming in *Der Islam*.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypses" *American Historical Review* 73 (1967-8).

gression of historical events. But what this literature more certainly yields is a set of poignant testimonies (although in the form of prophecies about the future, attributed to figures from the past) of the community's perception of, concerns about and responses to the devastating succession of wars, corrupt leaders, and sectarian strife that we know occurred in the first two centuries of its existence. These testimonies allow us to understand how the early experience of the Muslim community eventually resulted, for some people, in a strong aversion to dissension, one that opened the doors to embracing the tenet that obedience was owed to authorities no matter how corrupt they might be. Because the early authors of Islamic histories generally chronicled revolts, rebellions and civil wars, but did not record for us the motivations of the quietists, we must look for information about the viewpoints of these "other" Muslims—those who were not joining causes—in unusual sources such as apocalyptic *aḥādīth*. These *aḥādīth* paint a picture that does not conflict with the information found in the chronicles. Yet the apocalyptic traditions about the desire to have died, the necessity of avoiding participation in communal strife, and the descriptions of the confusion brought about by communal strife afford us more insight into the motivations and the viewpoint of the quietists than do the chronicles' descriptions of the tyranny of governors and the heroism of failed rebellions.

#### ABSTRACT

Over the last three decades, scholars have mined medieval apocalyptic literature for information about historical *events*. Although this has also been done for the Islamic apocalyptic literature, this article argues that the latter is better used to gain insight into people's *responses* to events rather than to chart the events themselves. This, in turn, allows us to better understand certain religious and political developments. For instance, the widespread fear and anxiety experienced by the early Muslim community, as evinced in the apocalyptic literature, appears to have led to the acceptance of the obligation, expressed in many Sunni creeds, to obey those in authority no matter how unjust they may be. The widespread acceptance of this quietist tenet is best understood as a response to the strife and discord that vexed the *umma* in the first centuries of Islamic history.